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ABSTRACT

Objects assembled in nonrepresentational fashion from tinker toy pieces are the starting point for a technical description writing assignment designed to increase the students' awareness of audience while at the same time giving them practice in description, analysis, and active judgment. Having been separated into two groups, each facing a different tinker toy creation, the students produce a technical description of the object. The two groups then exchange descriptions. Next each student attempts to reconstruct the object from a description written by a student in the other group and then writes a critique of the student's work. The drawing and critique are next returned to the writer of the description who is given the opportunity to rebut the critique. All three pieces of paper form a package that the teacher comments upon as a second audience but does not grade. Students respond favorably to this exercise, becoming less egocentric and more ready to face the problems of audience-centered writing. (JL)

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# Tinker Toys Are Not Only for Play

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A sense of audience is a difficult concept to control, a frustrating concept to teach. Most of us when we first write a discourse address only ourselves as audience. We are concerned primarily with capturing on paper the often chaotic bits of information floating in our minds. Early in the process of putting black squiggles on a page (or punching typewriter keys, or, if we are members of the computer generation, transferring our thoughts to a CRT), we are busy discovering what we are trying to say, puzzling it out, wandering in blind alleys, moving back to our point, meandering again. At this stage of the writing process, establishing our ideas to our preliminary satisfaction taxes our monitoring capabilities. A sense of writing for a reader outside ourselves and what it takes to gain the reader's agreement for our ideas awaits later monitoring. Even then, despite conscious effort to satisfy readers' needs, sometimes even "expert" writers fall short of their aim to some extent.

Student writers fail their readers much more often and more fully because they only sporadically reach the later stage. They typically get stuck at the first stage, never formulating any sense of audience outside themselves. True, if one asks them,

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they will declare an audience--generally the instructor. But if asked what they are actively doing to appeal to the instructor to gain agreement (which in their world typically equals a good grade), they have little idea beyond trying to use correct grammar (which they are sure they do not know well). Consequently, they often overlook lack of cohesion within and between sentences, incoherence over larger blocks of writing, and missing pieces of information. When the instructor points out such infelicities, students often reject the criticism, crediting it to unreasonable expectations. After all, they reason, they know what they were trying to say, and people always understand them when they talk. Such reasoning reveals naivete about the many times they are misunderstood and the role of feedback in clarification, and it reveals the basis for their failure to communicate clearly and effectively in writing.

Since one of the best ways to teach the subtle concept of audience is to provide audiences other than the instructor, I have devised a variety of consciousness raising exercises and projects. The following describes one of the exercises that helps students gain an awareness of audience needs and generates some ideas about how to satisfy those needs. The exercise involves writing a technical description. I use it early in a course because of its long range benefits. It works in beginning and advanced composition classes as well as technical writing and writing for the professions classes.

The exercise proceeds inductively. Students receive no warning of what lies in their immediate future except that they

will be writing in class. We have, of course, discussed the ingredients of a good technical description and compared them with those of a good affective description and read examples of both kinds. In addition, students have all written an affective description. They receive the following instructions:

Assignment for Technical Description

1. Look carefully at the object you will be describing. Walk around it and handle and measure it if you wish.

2. Describe the object on a sheet of your paper. Use ink please. Do not plan to recopy your description; you will not have enough time. Be sure to leave space between the lines and adequate margins so that you can edit your description as needed. Do not use a trade name in your description.

3. Assume this audience: readers who are intelligent but naive, not having seen the particular object before.

4. Follow the guidelines for an effective technical description that we discussed in class.

The objects to be described that accompany these instructions have been previously assembled in non-representational fashion from tinkertoy pieces. I try not to make them look like some familiar object, say an airplane or ferris wheel. I construct two different tinkertoy objects, placing one on either side of the room after I have divided the class in half and faced them in opposite directions.[1] During this first phase of the exercise, students simply describe the object assigned to them. Below are two sample descriptions (of the same object). Note the differences in approach that represent different judgments of audience knowledge and needs. Each description is essentially written with its own author in mind.

## Student Descriptions

1. The object consists of four short cylindrical objects attached to each other by four rods (two green and two red) to form a rectangle. Two of the short cylindrical objects are in a vertical position and have four small holes surrounding a centrally located fifth larger hole, along the diameter face of the cylinder. The other two have one hole. Centrally located along the diameter face and are in a horizontal position. Along the vertical set of the cylinders circumference face are eight holes. Protruding from one of the holes on both of the horizontal cylinders is a short orange rod, capped by another smaller orange disk. Bisecting the long rod, green rod, which connects the horizontal cylinders is a smaller longer orange cylinder itself bisected by the rod. Protruding upward from this cylinder is a medium length blue rod which at its apogee has connected to it a green flag.

2. The object is a Max Ernst fantasy created from children's construction equipment. Something LopLop might present as a parade vehicle. It is basically a rectangle of slender cylindrical sticks, joined at the corners by multi-holed wooden wheels. The pegs on the shorter, vertical sides of the rectangle are five inches tall and red. The horizontal bars are eight inches long and lime green. The festive appearance of the creation is on the top. One inch orange sticks with round orange caps rise out of the corner wheels. The center of the green top stick is dissected by an international orange peg, which supports the three inch blue flagpole. The flag is narrow, triangular and made of green plastic. The entire creation is very slender. It is no more than one inch deep.

As students turn their papers in, I separate them according to the object described so that during the next class session I can insure students' critiquing a description of an object they did not themselves describe. The assignment for the critique follows:

## Assignment for Critique of Technical Description

1. Take a sheet of paper and divide it with a line, leaving approximately two-thirds of the space below the line.

2. Next read each sentence carefully in the technical description given to you.

3. Then, to the best of your ability, draw the object described on the top one-third of your paper. Follow the description exactly; do not add any of your own ideas or assumptions.

4. When you have finished your drawing, use the bottom two-thirds of your paper to critique the description. Address your comments to the writer of the description directly. Use complete sentences, and observe the niceties of composition.

5. Read through the suggestions below in order to comment usefully on the description, but remember that you are not bound by the suggestions. Something not mentioned may be significant in the description you are critiquing. Also, remember to say <u>why</u> statements in the description succeed or fail.

6. Be sure to put your name on your critique.

<u>Things to consider when writing your comments</u>:

1. Is there any reason (because of the description you have) why you could not make any sort of sketch of the object as described, or could only make a partial sketch? If so, why?

2. From the background knowledge you have about the object, did you at any point notice where some naive reader would run into problems?

3. At what point(s), if any, did you find the description confusing? Or helpful?

4. If the description was confusing, is it confusing because of syntax, punctuation, and spelling? Or because of cohesion and order? If the description was clear to you, was it because all these matters were handled felicitously?

5. Did the writer's word choices help or hinder your understanding? Why?

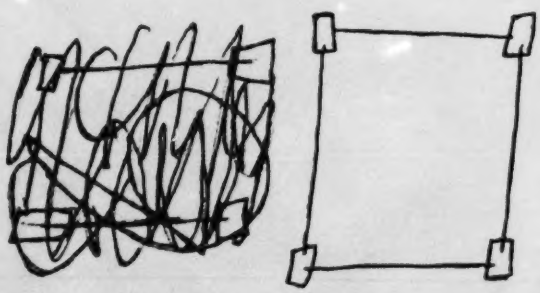
6. Did the writer relate the object to someone or something through an analogy or simile that would be familiar to an average reader? Or something or someone unfamiliar?

7. Is there anything in the description that is completely irrelevant to the main point of the description--or to the business of sketching the object?

Below are critiques of the two descriptions above.

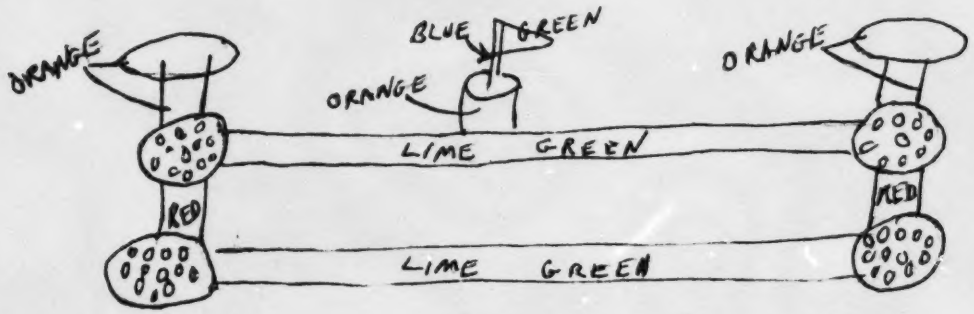
<u>Student Critiques</u>

1.



I couldn't finish my drawing because I couldn't understand the description. I was confused right away by an object consisting of objects. You kept describing cylinders and rods, and I got confused about which ones you were describing. I couldn't understand what you meant by vertical position and horizontal cylinders. You used terms in your description that were hard for me to understand. If you had used a metaphor or simile, that might have helped. But the geometrical terms I got lost with. I couldn't get past the description of the rectangle. After that the description became very confusing.

2.




Your description is fairly accurate but could be improved by adding the following:

1. Diameter of "slender cylindrical sticks."
2. Size and position of wooden wheets (also color). I just guessed in my drawing.
3. Location and number of holes in wheels.
4. Diameter of orange sticks.
5. More accurate description of orange caps.
6. Dimensions of orange peg (w/flag). I think you meant to say it "bisected" the green stick instead of "dissected." Also, what is an "international orange peg"?
7. Diameter of flag pole.
8. Dimensions of flag and direction that it points.

Also--the Max Ernst reference seems out of place in a technical description, and it isn't a reference most people would recognize. It doesn't help. LopLop is out of place too, and again isn't descriptive.

These two critiques are somewhat atypical in addressing a classmate directly. Despite instructions to do so, some students say <u>you</u> only in passing, and many ignore the name of the person

whose description they are critiquing. They take refuge from familiarity by using third person. As further sign of their uneasiness with direct address, some avoid reference to themselves too. These choices reflect the typical classroom situation where students remain anonymous to each other, prefering to address comments to the teacher, not fellow classmates. However, most students do respond to the instructions and become acclimated to addressing at least one classmate. This introduction initiates freer, livelier classroom discussions during the rest of the semester.

The second critique is more strongly atypical in another way. The listing of points creates a sense of order missing from the first critique. It is more helpful than the first critique not only in what the critiquer says but in how he says it.

Both are typical in focusing on negative aspects of the descriptions although the instructions encourage compliments where due. Students, like teachers (they seem to ape us in ways we would least like them to), seem to find it easier to take what is well done in a piece of writing for granted and point out flaws.

Students then get back their descriptions with critiques attached. The critiques tend to be eye-openers for the students. What they have assumed to be good efforts at clear description are often revealed as inadequate at best, incoherent at worst. Students become acutely aware of their lapses in clarity and completeness as they read the honest responses of fellow classmates. And occasionally they are pleased to know that a

word here and there was particularly apt, that a chosen simile pictured the object neatly for the reader.

Then students are given the opportunity to rebut the critiques of their descriptions. Sometimes a student complains justifiably of not being able to understand the critique since critiques are somewhat as liable to be poorly written as descriptions. But this result is not as negative as it might seem because the notion of audience needs is again underscored. Mostly, though, the critiques make valid, clear points to which the original writer of the description can respond. Often, as we see below in the rebuttals to the critiques above, students naturally go on the defensive. But overall students are receptive to the feedback on their writing, occasionally even going beyond their critiquers to point out additional places where the description could have been improved.

## Responses to the Critiques

1. Reading over the critique, I've got to admit that it is basically accurate. The description I presented was only clear to myself in many details. Believing it necessary to describe the object as completely as possible, I got involved in trying to describe all of the small details as possible but did not put them in logical order so that when I read it back even I had problems understanding the description. I should have gone from a very general description of the object, to the parts that made up the whole and there relationship in space to each other. Moving to the more specific details after the general shape was understood. Instead I took each part that made up the whole and went into the minutae of detail about each, confusing the reader. I failed to make a logical progression in the description in order to lead the reader to a clear picture of the object. When I look back on my description now I would have started out by relating the object to something familiar so that the reader would start out with some point of reference.

Perhaps I did make too much use of geometric terms in places, but overall I think the critique was wrong in making that criticism. The object was made up of geometric shapes. There is no other way to describe it. I tend to think most readers would not become confused by the use of geometric terms to the extent that the writer of the critique did.

2. Mr. D. submitted a fine review of my technical description. I could follow his comments easily. If I were to rewrite my description, I would include all the measurements he asked for--details of the construction such as the dimensions of the orange peg and diameter of the flagpole. I would also make the description of the "caps" more lucid by comparing them to something familiar. I looked up "dissected" and he is right.

I have only two complaints with Mr. D's critique. One is that he tended to do what I did with my critique, dwell on the negative and take the good aspects for granted. In the future, he should always include something positive. I ought to too. The other complaint has to do with his objection to my paper that I was too poetic and not specific enough. He says my reference to Max Ernst seemed out of place. I think my allusion to Max Ernst is valid. It was the first thing I thought of looking at the piece. It makes the description interesting in my opinion. The reference to LopLop does that too.

It is only at this point, when I have descriptions, critiques, and rebuttals in one package, that I read through the material. I do not grade the exercise. I simply comment on any of the three pieces as a second audience if what I can add will be particularly helpful.

The responses from students to this exercise are favorable. That emerges to some extent in the rebuttals, but I also get verbal feedback. Students enjoy the element of fun that tinkertoys bring to the classroom. But what is more important, they report the graphic awarenesses the exercise generates. They voluntarily share their description packages with classmates, curious to see how others handled the assignment and what responses they called forth.

The ramifications I notice from this exercise are several. One is that it gives students practice not only in description but in another important rhetorical operation, analysis, and active judgment based upon that analysis rather than simply passive absorption of material. Another is that students become

less egocentric. Although they do not become super attentive overnight to their readers nor successfully appeal to them in each new writing situation, the exercise moves them in that direction. They become more alert to infelicities, particularly of incoherence, during our workshop sessions in which we discuss student work, and are more adept at suggesting needed improvements for their own or classmates writing. In other words, the stage is set for continuing discussion of strategies to overcome writing problems and for further audience-centered writing assignments. On a larger scale, students become aware that writing situations are problem solving situations, with how to gain audience agreement a problem to be solved. They are led into a state of disequilibrium which, as Piaget tells us, is the key to intellectual growth.

## Notes

1. I rarely teach more than one composition class a semester, but two classes the same size would present the option of using a different tinkertoy object for each class and then exchanging descriptions between classes for critiquing, an option that would work equally well. With two classes one could also vary the exercise by using a tinkertoy object for one class and an object constructed out of other materials for the other class.